

JAPAN'S SCHOOLS

Myths, Realities, and Comparisons with the United States

By Gary DeCoker

In the 1980s, when the Japanese economy was booming, debates over educational reform in the United States seemed often to start in Japan. The Japanese economy was outperforming the US economy because Japanese schools were outperforming our schools, or so the argument went until their economy collapsed. When the US economy eventually rebounded, no one cited our educational system as a source of its recovery, and the connection between education and the economy was forgotten.

During the decade-long debates over whether Japanese education could or should be a model for US education, American politicians and the media regularly added their opinions to the point where even the average American could reel off casual impressions of schools in Japan. Some people embraced Japanese education as a model of high standards and rigorous schooling; others rejected it as a test-obsessed, anxiety-producing failure. The debate was never resolved, but the sound bites presented in support of either side still linger, even though they lack nuance and often are outright wrong.

The collapse of Japan's bubble economy has since returned the study of Japanese education to the scholarly community where nuance isn't lacking, but where theoretical concerns have replaced political ideology and kept us from agreement on even some of the most basic points. For conservatives, Japan represents the success of a test-driven education; for progressives, it illustrates the detriments of using tests as a means of improving education. Others still point out more accurately that the Ministry of Education¹ discourages Japanese schools from using standardized tests to assess their students and themselves. The impetus for most testing comes at the initiative of academically oriented schools and the private, for-profit *juku* (private supplementary school) industry in response to the high school and university entrance examination system.

In addition to political and theoretical debates, another source of our impressions of Japanese education comes from exchange programs and study tours of teachers and students. By virtue of their trips to Japan or their hosting of visitors from Japan, these instant experts eagerly share the truths of what they have seen or heard about Japanese schools. Their vignettes cannot be disputed—they saw what they saw—but when they result in hasty generalizations, these observations fail to provide insight.

My own experience as an observer of the Japanese educational system began thirty years ago, and, looking back on my early years, I too spread my share of inaccuracies. So as a means of penance, here is my attempt to counteract my own and others' distortions by presenting a summary of the most common misconceptions about Japanese education, followed by some thoughts on comparative education and its use as an impetus for reforming US education.

The Ministry of Education

Japan, like most of the rest of the world, has a centralized system of education that gives the Ministry of Education (MOE) far more

influence and fiscal responsibility than the US Department of Education in our decentralized system. During the war years, the MOE operated as a powerful arm of the Japanese military, using textbooks and regimented school rituals to prepare boys for life as soldiers. In the years after the US Occupation, the MOE reasserted its power and often battled the Japan Teachers Union and others over textbook content, standardized testing, teacher evaluations, and other issues. As a result, for many Japanese and foreign observers, the MOE represents all that was and is wrong with Japanese education.

Given this history, it is not surprising that many people still think of the MOE as a rigid enforcer of draconian policies. In response to recent Japanese government efforts to deregulate, however, the MOE has shifted its approach and begun promoting autonomy, flexibility, and diversity in the schools. At a meeting a few years ago, a Ministry of Education bureaucrat told me that the MOE and the local schools seem to have switched positions, and that many local school officials—accustomed as they were to rigid MOE regulations—are now pressing the Ministry for more clarity and direction. For example, in an effort to promote interdisciplinary, active, and locally-based learning, the MOE included “integrated studies” (a time for teachers and schools to determine content) in a recent curricular revision, but many schools are still struggling to determine how to use this more open-ended aspect of the curriculum.

Without a doubt, the MOE continues to exercise substantial control over Japanese education, but its power is shared and challenged by many other constituent groups, including parents, *juku*, local and regional education officials, elected politicians, and teachers themselves.² The debate over educational reform gets a lot of play in the Japanese media, and the MOE is under attack from many sectors for introducing progressive reforms under the heading “*yutori kyōiku*” or “education that gives children room to grow.” Recent changes include reducing curricular content and time in school, encouraging ability grouping, valuing thinking skills over basic content, and promoting student interest over external motivation. Critics accuse the Ministry of undermining education standards, a dramatic contrast to earlier criticism that standards were unrealistically high.

In response to the reforms, academically-oriented parents are putting pressure on schools to not disregard examination preparation, *juku* are regaining prominence by aggressively pointing out the academic gains made by their students, and politicians and the media are bringing forth example after example of poor-performing students. Teachers, caught between their desire to implement the reforms and to please parents, find themselves increasingly victims of “teacher bashing.” The MOE, for its part, is faced with unintended consequences of some of its policies. For instance, the shift to a five-day school week, ostensibly made to parallel a similar change in the workweek and to provide more family time, resulted in an increase

in juku attendance. Similarly, some junior and senior high schools use the time designated for integrated studies to focus on examination preparation.

University Entrance Examinations

The Japanese post-secondary education system, too, has seen dramatic changes in the past decade and a half. Perhaps the most important ones are a result of the decline in the number of eighteen-year-olds from the peak of just over 2,000,000 in 1992 to about 1,400,000 in 2004. In 2012, the number will drop to less than 1,200,000, a decline of about 40 percent in twenty years. As a result, even Japan's top-ranked universities now must pay attention to the recruiting of students, and many lower-ranking schools are unable to meet their enrollment goals. The pressure of demographic change has been exacerbated by MOE policies that foster competition between universities under the threat of reduced funding or the closure of some programs.

A detailed description of the various postsecondary reforms is not possible here, so I will focus on an area where many Americans continue to hold obsolete views: university entrance examinations.³ Since 1990, with the introduction of the National Center Test, the university entrance examination system has changed dramatically. Individual departments within universities still manage their own admission process and write their own examinations, but those that use the first-stage Center Test (all public and many private colleges) are now able to choose sections from this examination, rather than testing the entire range of core subjects (English, Japanese, science, math, and social studies) as in prior years. In addition to varying test content, colleges also have created alternative admission options by designating spots in their incoming class for students from certain high schools or with specific skills or experiences (academic, arts, athletics, overseas residency, etc.). These students do not necessarily have to take the same entrance examination or score as high on the examinations they take. Still other applicants are allowed to choose essays or oral interviews rather than standardized, objective examinations. As a result of these changes, many high schools have begun grouping students so they can specialize on the specific subject matter and test format that they will face on their entrance examinations. Although students still enroll in a full range of high school classes, they narrow their attention to the two or three subjects that will be on their examination. This narrowing of curricular focus is another unintended consequence of the MOE's introduction of flexibility into the educational system.

The complexity and diversity in the university admission system has been a boon to the cram school industry, driving students to the juku in hopes of understanding their options in addition to learning exam content. Many colleges, noticing the unbalanced prepara-



These elementary school students are studying English through a game in an Integrated Studies class.
Photo Courtesy of Charlotte Ellington

tion of their incoming students, have begun remedial programs. The need for these programs also results from the lowering of entrance standards by many colleges in response to the sharp decline in the applicant pool of eighteen-year-olds. In the end, young people have more choices than they did a few decades ago, and the incoming class of most universities includes students who have taken various routes to their admission. Only at the most

selective colleges does the entrance system remain especially competitive, and even at these schools many more options now exist for prospective students.

Suicide and Examination Pressure

Probably the most common American impression of Japanese schools is that the high-stakes, high-pressure entrance examination system leads to a high suicide rate among young people. Like any stereotype, this one contains an element of truth: sadly, some students who do poorly on their exams in fact commit suicide. Although the overall suicide rate in Japan is about twice as high as the United States, the rate for young people, except for adolescent girls, is actually higher in the United States.⁴

The putative connection between suicide and examinations probably arose during the first few decades after the Occupation, when the suicide rate for young people was high and Japanese public criticism of the Ministry of Education (MOE) was especially vehement. Each February, when the examination results were made public, the media featured heart-wrenching stories about youth suicide, often accompanied by tragic suicide notes thanking parents and family members for their support and deploring their own failure. A more careful look at the data on suicide, however, reveals that the majority of adolescent suicides during this time period resulted, not from the examination failures of the highly motivated students, but from disaffected students living on the margins of the war-ravaged society. In fact, as the enrollment of students in high schools increased during the late 1960s and 1970s, suicide rates for this age group actually declined.⁵ Since the late 1990s, the overall suicide rate in Japan has risen significantly, perhaps as a result of the post-bubble recession and related bankruptcies and job loss.⁶ Most observers, however, attribute the corresponding rise in suicide among young people to the influence of adult suicide, and the publicity associated with it, rather than to examination pressure.

Social Problems and Education:

Bullying, School Refusal, and Shut-Ins

Bullying has long been one of the most widely studied social problems in Japan. The singling out of a child (or less often a teacher) by a group of children takes place most often in junior high schools. The physical and emotional abuse sometimes can be so severe that it

leads to death, either by “inadvertent homicide” or suicide. American and Japanese commentators who were critical of Japanese education often used bullying along with the suicide rate as a means to bolster their criticisms. But just like suicide, the relationship to schooling is tenuous.

Although bullying is widespread and can lead to tragic consequences, by comparison to what many American schools confront, the problem can seem less significant. Drugs, weapons, gangs, and the resulting metal detectors and security guards, common to many American schools, don’t exist in most Japanese schools, although a recent spate of school intrusions and kidnappings have raised concern about the safety of schoolchildren.

A more recent problem in Japan is school refusal, when students drop out without an apparent reason, and its related *hikikomori* (withdrawal or shut-ins), when a young person refuses to leave the home or the bedroom. Some observers list the number of shut-ins in the hundreds of thousands, but official Japanese government estimates are closer to 50,000. Somewhat parallel in complexity and origin to the primarily Western problem of anorexia, shut-ins also are skewed toward one gender, in this case mostly male. Because the problem of shut-ins manifests in school—often arising from bullying or other problems that these young people face, then leading to school refusal, and finally to withdrawal—it is tempting to conclude that this and other social maladies are caused by the schools, but, like youth suicide, the issue is more complex.

In the years since the economic collapse, a number of social problems have emerged among young people, problems once termed “American problems.” Many Japanese politicians and commentators look back fondly on the days when the economy was strong, mothers were devoted to their children, and the schools were rigorous and teacher centered, implying a causal relationship between recent changes and various social problems. But just as most Americans would hesitate to blame the schools for drugs, violence, or teen pregnancy, we also should resist the temptation to link Japanese social problems to their schools.⁷

Differences Between Levels and Types of Schooling

Americans instinctively understand the differences between schools in the United States and use various groupings to point to those distinctions: urban, rural, suburban; public, private; percent of students qualifying for federal free or reduced lunch, etc. Despite our comfort in our own diversity, however, we find it easy to speak of Japanese schools as if they are somehow all the same. Perhaps swayed by the homogeneity of black-haired children—some wearing identical school uniforms—we take generalizations that may fit one type of school and apply them to the entire system.

Distinctions between levels (preschool, elementary, junior high, high school) are perhaps the most important for Americans to note. In



Art is considered a basic subject in grades 1–9 in Japan, and is required of all students.

Photo Courtesy of Charlotte Ellington

Japanese preschools and early elementary grades, teachers work to socialize students and structure the day around various group activities.⁸ High school classes are more oriented to the individual student, but social grouping still takes place in club and other co-curricular settings.⁹ Junior high schools are somewhere in between: they typically share an administrative connection to elementary schools, but most of their teachers are subject-area specialists.

Public versus private education offers another distinction, but these terms have different implications in Japan than in the United States. Less than one percent of elementary schools and about six percent of junior high schools are private. MOE funding regulations and the Japanese ideal of educational egalitarianism result in little variation in compulsory schooling, although family supplementary spending introduces disparity across socioeconomic groups. More private schools exist in the non-compulsory preschools (over 50 percent) and high schools (about 25 percent), although the casual observer would have trouble seeing any differences between these and the public schools. Preschools, both public and private, might better be distinguished by those with a daycare function and those that offer only a few hours of schooling each day for children with a stay-at-home parent or caregiver. And among all types of preschools can be found great differences in emphasis, from highly academic to those that rely on more child-centered activities.

At the high school level, among both public and private schools, the most noticeable difference is between academically-oriented (college-prep) schools and those whose students have other interests. For college-aspiring parents and their children, careful distinctions made between academic schools are based primarily on the percentage of graduates enrolling in elite universities, not on whether a school is public or private. Some private schools, however, are connected with schools at the next level all the way through college, giving their students an enrollment advantage. Students in these connected schools can minimize the stress and anxiety of the high school and university entrance examinations by moving directly from one school to the next. Private junior high and high schools also can circumvent some MOE reforms and give added emphasis to preparation for entrance examinations. As a result, they are rising in reputation and becoming more popular among college-motivated parents and their children, especially in urban areas. About 75 percent of Japanese college students enroll in private institutions, and, at this level, distinctions between private and public are more profound. With the exception of a few elite private schools, the public national universities still carry the most prestige; at the middle level there is a range of public and private universities; most of the lower ranking schools are private.

Distinctions also can be made within the category of private *juku*. The typical English translation, “cram school,” might better be

changed to “private, supplementary school” in order to represent the diversity included in the generic Japanese term “juku.” For most Americans, juku refers to examination-preparation schools, but the Japanese term takes in a range of activities from full-time test preparation schools for high school graduates, to academic enrichment, remedial work, tutoring, and cultural pursuits for students of all ages. Juku also encompasses a variety of organizational structures from companies that generate billions of dollars in revenue (e.g. Kawai Juku and Yoyogi Zemi) to classes held in private homes as a means of supplementing the family income.¹⁰ Most Japanese participate in at least one form of these educational opportunities at some point in their life; for many, these experiences become more important, enjoyable, and educational than the regular schools.

Creativity and the Curriculum

When Japanese education, with its high scores on international achievement tests, was being held up as a model for US educational reform in the 1980s and 90s, two of the most common rebuttals by American educators were that the Japanese curriculum was narrowly focused on the “basics,” and that Japanese teachers and their students lacked creativity. Anyone who has visited Japanese elementary and junior high schools knows that the first statement is incorrect. The Ministry of Education curriculum for grades 1–9 sets forth a full range of subjects, including music, art and physical education, subjects often dropped from US schools because of budget cuts and test preparation. The curriculum of most Japanese high schools, especially academically-oriented schools, is more narrowly focused on the subjects found on college entrance examinations, but club and after-school activities allow time for additional pursuits.

The issue of creativity is more complex. The teaching model promoted by the most up-to-date teachers and teacher educators in Japan follows a pattern of the teacher (1) reviewing the previous lesson and introducing a new problem to the students, (2) letting small groups work to solve the problem, (3) asking a representative of each group to explain their solution, (4) commenting on the student responses, and (5) summarizing the lesson. US teachers saw examples of this kind of teaching in the TIMSS (Third International Mathematics and Science Study) video study of schools in Germany, Japan, and the United States. The videos unfortunately presented US teaching as drill-and-practice, rather than providing an example of US teaching at its best. A comparable image of good teaching in the United States might be where a teacher has the freedom to invent each day’s lessons, guided by student initiative and the knowledge of the curriculum appropriate for the grade level and subject area. John Dewey described this approach in *The Child and the Curriculum* (1902), and Herbert Kohl used it in his fifth-grade classroom in *36 Children* (1967).

On the surface, the US approach seems more creative, but my own impression is that each country starts with a different concept of creativity. In the United States we value thinking “out of the box,” where the teacher and students invent something new. The Japanese, on the other hand, promote thinking “within the box,” where the teacher sets up a framework that focuses student attention, then allows them to explore creatively within that framework. At their best, each approach results in a great deal of creativity and a great deal of learning. The most pressing issue in both countries is to move beyond polarizing debates over government policies and get best practices, whatever they may be, into the classroom.

Japanese and US Education: Comparative Examples

Despite the misconceptions that many Americans have about Japan’s schools, there is a lot to learn from our attempts at comparison. Still, comparisons themselves can easily lead to further misconceptions when researchers selectively address certain aspects of an educational system. In my own writing, for instance, I sometimes present a one-sided view of Japanese education in order to use Japan as a mirror that allows us to better see our own system. In the edited book *National Standards and School Reform in Japan and the United States*, for example, my colleagues and I used Japan to portray the “way in which national standards may in fact affect educational achievement or teaching practice.” Our goal was to describe, “the interplay of various constituencies in Japan’s centralized system,” in order to “help American educators and policymakers consider issues that may apply to education in the United States.”¹⁰ The origin of the book was our belief that Americans instinctively reject national education standards without recognizing the possible benefits of a more centralized system. In the book, therefore, we focused on favorable aspects of Japan’s national curriculum.

One benefit of national standards is that they create a more stable curriculum that changes only incrementally over the years. Textbook publishers and teachers, because they know what is to be taught, can focus on creating the best books and best pedagogy for helping students learn the subject matter. A stable, common curriculum also makes it possible for teachers in Japan to work together to perfect their lessons through Lesson Study. Simply described, Lesson Study is a process by which teachers, most commonly in elementary schools, collaboratively design a lesson that brings to life their long-term goals while also teaching particular content. One team member then teaches the lesson while the others carefully study student responses. Finally, the entire team shares what they observed, drawing out the implications for the specific lesson and unit design and for teaching and learning in general. Some groups present their work in “public lessons,” in which teachers from other schools visit to watch and discuss the lesson. The structure that fosters Lesson Study includes professional development opportunities and planning time for teachers and the yearly designation of each school’s curricular area of study.

Recent efforts to bring Lesson Study to American schools illustrate the limitless potential of comparative research.¹¹ At its best, the study of another country’s educational system can become the source of new ideas. At its worst, it results in misrepresentation. The stereotypes about Japanese education arose from sweeping generalizations made from limited data, from comparative research misused to promote a political reform agenda, and from educational ideas appropriated without a full understanding of the context in which they emerged. The research on Lesson Study, ongoing for over a decade, has potential, I believe, because it takes a successful idea found in some Japanese schools and works to create a context whereby it could succeed in the United States.

Conclusion

As for the future of Japanese education, Ministry of Education reforms will likely continue to be skewed by the entrance examination system as parents, juku, junior and senior high schools, and universities maneuver to gain advantage. Japan’s educational system (most notably the juku) has become especially adept at delivering

specific content, and the Ministry seems unlikely to shift too far away from a system that is so well integrated into Japanese society. Demographic, economic, and social forces, however, will continue to exert pressure on the system. The decline in the number of school-age children, for instance, will soon result in a system where there are about as many spaces for university students as there are aspirants. And as the employment system has changed, many high school students have begun to consider options other than the traditional track leading to university admission. In response to economic competition from their Asian neighbors and concerns that life for Japanese young people is too soft, a strong conservative backlash is building that calls for a return to basic skills, traditional pedagogy, and increased competition. Progressive leaders remain concerned about the ability of the system to foster “new basics” such as thinking, problem solving, and inquiry, first mentioned by the Ministry of Education in the 1989 reforms.

Many observers have called Japan’s recent educational reforms the “third wave,” after the reforms of post-Meiji and post-WWII. These earlier reforms, too, were highly contested, but at least then there was agreement that something needed to be done in response to the forced opening of the country (modernization) and the loss of the war (democratization). The impetus for the current reform is not as clear. Some see it as a reaction to an antiquated system; others as a response to (or cause of) declining educational achievement; still others question the Ministry’s insistence on change in the first place. Japan’s economic collapse in the early 1990s coincided with the beginning of the third wave of reform, and the first generation to be educated under these reforms will soon graduate from college and enter the workforce, just as the country appears to be emerging from its “malaise.” If the country’s worldwide technological, economic, and cultural influence continues to grow, reformers of all stripes will surely line up to take credit.

In building an educational system for the twenty-first century, Japan has some important advantages. As they experiment with the “new basics,” they are able to weave them into a well-articulated curriculum of agreed-upon content. In other words, they have a solid foundation of content to which they are trying to add a pedagogy that fosters intellectual skills. In the United States, we have a long tradition of teaching toward these skills, but, despite our emphasis on standards and assessment, we still struggle as a nation to agree upon the content we should teach. During the past two decades of reform, our attempts to move toward higher academic standards and regular assessment have led us to question the efficacy and desirability of our pedagogy, almost as if the development of intellectual skills is antithetical to the learning of content. A decade ago, Americans were attracted to Japanese education because of their high standards and test scores. Ironically, if the current Japanese reform effort is successful, what we may learn next from the Japanese is a pedagogy of intellectual skill development that is grounded in subject-area content.

Still, it is hard to imagine Japanese education capturing American attention to the extent that it did fifteen to twenty years ago. Scholars, however, will continue to produce thoughtful studies that point out positive or negative aspects of the system and use Japan as a way to reflect on our own educational system. And others with a more social science bent will explore education as it relates to various aspects of Japanese culture, society, and the political system. In East Asia, on the other hand, where many countries are facing the

same challenge, moving beyond a heretofore successful subject-based system, Japanese education will likely continue to receive a great deal of attention. ■

NOTES

1. In 2001, the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture became the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology.
2. For information on educational reform, see Roger Goodman and David Phillips, eds., *Can the Japanese Change Their Education System?* (Oxford: Symposium Books, 2003); Ryoko Tsuneyoshi, “The New Japanese Educational Reforms and the Achievement ‘Crisis’ Debate.” *Educational Policy* 18:2 (May 2004): 364–394; Ryoko Tsuneyoshi, ed., *Reconsidering Japanese Education: 21st Century Abilities in the Japanese Context* (Tokyo: Graduate School of Education, University of Tokyo, 2004); and Christopher Bjork and Ryoko Tsuneyoshi, “Education Reform in Japan: Competing Visions for the Future.” *Phi Delta Kappan* 86:8 (April 2005): 619–626. *Japan Echo*, a bimonthly journal made up mostly of articles first published in Japanese magazines, often includes sections on Japanese education, valuable especially because they represent the diversity of opinion in Japan. See December 2000, June 2001, August 2003, February 2004, April 2005, and April 2006 at <http://www.japanecho.co.jp/>.
3. Nearly one third of Japan universities face enrollment difficulties, some to the point of possible financial collapse. For a discussion of recent changes in Japanese post-secondary education, see J. S. Eades, Roger Goodman, and Yumiko Hada, eds., *The ‘Big Bang’ in Japanese Higher Education: The 2004 Reforms and the Dynamics of Change* (Melbourne: Trans Pacific Press, 2005).
4. The World Health Organization breaks down suicide data by generations. The following data list the US (year 2001) rates per 100,000 followed by the Japanese (year 2002) rates. Ages 5–14: male 1.0 / 0.4; female 0.3 / 0.2. Ages 15–24: male 16.6 / 14.7; female 2.9 / 6.3. Japan overtakes the United States in this unfortunate statistic for all population segments above twenty-five years of age, with a strikingly higher rate for middle-aged men and older women.
5. Thomas Rohlen, *Japan’s High Schools* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), 327–334.
6. A graph showing the Japanese unemployment rate superimposed over the male suicide rate from 1953 to 2003 shows a remarkable parallel. See W. Michael Cox and Jaheong Koo, “Miracle to Malaise: What’s Next for Japan?” *Economic Letter—Insights from the Federal Reserve Bank of Dallas* 1:1 (January 2006) at <http://www.dallasfed.org/research/ecllett/2006/el0601.html>.
7. For information on adolescent development, see Rebecca Erwin Fukuzawa and Gerald K. Letendre, *Intense Years: How Japanese Adolescents Balance School, Family, and Friends* (New York: RoutledgeFalmer, 2000).
8. See Catherine C. Lewis, *Educating Hearts and Minds: Reflections on Japanese Preschool and Elementary Education*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995.
9. For a discussion of clubs in Japanese secondary schools, see Peter Cave, “*Bukat-sudō*: The Educational Role of Japanese School Clubs,” *Journal of Japanese Studies* 30:2 (Summer 2004), 383–415.
10. See Nancy Ukai Russell, “Lessons from Japanese Cram Schools,” in *The Challenge of Eastern Asian Education: Implications for America*, edited by William K. Cummings and Philip G. Altbach (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997), 153–170.
11. For information on Lesson Study, see www.lessonresearch.net. See also Catherine Lewis, Rebecca Perry, and Aki Murata: “How Should Research Contribute to Instructional Improvement? The Case of Lesson Study.” *Educational Researcher* 35:3 (April 2006) 3–14.

GARY DECOKER is Professor of Japanese Studies at Earlham College. His publications include translations and analyses of Japanese historical documents and studies of contemporary Japanese education.